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### **WEEKLY COLUMN**

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# Notes from the Georgia State Senate

## *Senate passes bills protecting families, children and consumers*

By Senator Bill Heath



The state Senate is now well into the second half of the 2006 session, and legislative business is moving at a lightning-fast pace. We are rapidly headed towards "Crossover Day" in the General Assembly, which is the deadline for bills to be passed along from the House to the Senate or vice versa. Last week, the Republican-led Senate passed legislation that will further protect families, children and consumers in our state, which is one of the main reasons I began a career in public service – to protect the citizens of Georgia.

Last Thursday, we passed Senate Bill 396, which many are now referring to as the "Castle Doctrine." This legislation protects the rights of law-abiding citizens by removing the "duty to retreat" if you are attacked in any place you have a right to be. The "duty to retreat" is often taken to mean that before defending themselves a person must attempt to retreat or run away from their attacker. The bill also stipulates that if a criminal breaks into your home, your occupied vehicle or your place of business, you may presume he or she is there to do bodily harm, and you may use any force against that person. The right to protect yourself, your children or your spouse should be guaranteed, no matter where you are. It is my position that Georgians who protect themselves and their families from criminals should be regarded as heroes, not treated like criminals.

Also last week, we passed Senate Bill 522, known as *Amy's Law*. As many of you may recall, Amy Yates was just days away from her ninth birthday when she disappeared in April of 2004. Hours after a *Levi's Call* was put out, the little girl with long hair and an infectious smile was found murdered in the trailer park where she lived in Carrollton. Her death stunned the entire community – but they and the rest of the state were even more shocked and appalled to learn that the little girl had been murdered by another child. Under Senate Bill 522, children age 12 and under who commit murder, can be locked up until age 21. *Amy's Law* is limited to murder cases, and does not affect other serious crimes perpetrated by juveniles such as rape or armed robbery. The legislation passed the Senate with unanimous support, and now goes to the House of Representatives for debate.

Last week, we also passed legislation prohibiting pawnbrokers from repossessing vehicles without first notifying the owners – giving them the opportunity to pay up or lose their wheels. Under Senate Bill 535, any business that offers motor vehicle title pawns will be regulated by the Governor's Office of Consumer Affairs and must be renewed every two years.

Under the provisions of the legislation, consumers will have 20 days to redeem their car, van or SUV by paying the principal, unpaid interest, pawnshop charges, and any repossession and storage fees. If the vehicle is not redeemed within the 20 days, the pawnbroker must sell the vehicle within 60 days and return any profit to the consumer.

The legislation also prohibits the accrual of interest and pawnshop charges on a member of the military who has pawned a vehicle and has been deployed to combat.

We have many more issues ahead of us and as always, I work for you and your concerns are my concern. Until next week...

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***Sen. Bill Heath represents the 31<sup>st</sup> Senate District, which includes all of Haralson and Polk Counties and parts of Bartow and Paulding Counties. He may be reached at 404.463.1361, or by email at [billheath@billheath.net](mailto:billheath@billheath.net).***